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Governor Richardson Wins \$700,000 EPA Grant for Rio Puerco Restoration

(Santa Fe, NM) — Beginning on the Continental Divide near Cuba, the Rio Puerco drains approximately 4.5 million acres of northwestern New Mexico before it flows into the Rio Grande near Bernardo. The Rio Grande's largest tributary in the State of New Mexico, the Rio Puerco is also, unfortunately, the largest source of sediment both to the middle section of the river and to Elephant Butte Reservoir.

In an effort to combat this sediment pollution, Governor Bill Richardson recently made a \$700,000 grant available to the Rio Puerco Management Committee (RPMC). These funds, granted by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and administered by the New Mexico Environment Department (NMED), will help the RPMC address high sediment levels in the river, a legacy of unwise grazing and land management practices, poor soils and arid conditions.

"The Rio Puerco is a perfect example of how closely water quality and water quantity are linked in the State of New Mexico," said NMED Secretary Ron Curry. "By addressing river sediments, this Department is making sure that this water can be beneficially used—increasing supply for humans and protecting a vital habitat for aquatic organisms."

Excessive sediment in a river can hinder the lifecycles of some wildlife by clogging the streambeds where larvae develop. Over-sedimentation can also inhibit the growth of underwater vegetation and block fish gills, obstructing their breathing.

This \$700,000 grant comes from the EPA's new Watershed Initiative Program, aimed at encouraging community-based approaches to restoring, preserving and protecting the nation's waters. The Rio Puerco proposal was one of several around the state received for grant consideration. After careful review, Governor Bill Richardson and New Mexico's Tribal Leaders nominated the RPMC proposal to the EPA. Of the 170 projects nominated to EPA from around the country, the Rio Puerco was one of only 20 selected for funding.

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With this grant, the RPMC plans to focus on the Rio Puerco watershed's upper main stem and Torreon Wash sub-basins. Projects will include upland and in-channel stream restoration, stabilizing channel flow and topography, implementing grazing management practices and continuing public education initiatives.

Cooperating organizations in this program include the RPMC, NMED Surface Water Quality Bureau, New Mexico Department of Transportation, New Mexico Bureau of Geology and Mineral Resources, Pueblo of Jemez, Navajo Nation, local landowners and allotment permittees.

For further information, contact Jon Goldstein, Communications Director, NMED at (505) 827-0314.

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